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THE CAMPAIGN FOR THE CAVES: THE BATTLES FOR ZHAWAR IN THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR

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The Soviets entered Afghanistan in late December 1979 to suppress a growing insurgency and to replace an out-of-control communist regime with another communist, pro-Moscow government. The Soviet government realized too late that they were then stuck in the middle of a civil war fighting guerrilla forces on some of the world's toughest terrain. The Soviets had planned to merely prop up the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) and let the Afghan communist forces fight the Mujahideen guerrillas. Instead, the Soviets found their forces increasingly drawn into the battle-a nonlinear, unconventional battle which they were ill equipped or trained for.

The Soviet-Afghan War was primarily fought on the tactical level, but the strategic focus was a struggle by each side to strangle the others logistics lifeline. The Mujahideen and Soviets spent a great deal of time and energy defending their logistics network and attacking the other's. The Mujahideen targeted the Soviet lines of communication-the crucial road network over which the Soviet and DRA supplies had to move and ambushed convoys or cut off roads at critical mountain passes. The Soviet attack on the Mujahideen logistics was done in two phases. From 1980 until 1985, the Soviets sought to eliminate Mujahideen support in the countryside.

Early in the war, Mujahideen logistics requirements were fairly simple and primarily concerned with ammunition resupply and evacuating the wounded. The rural population willingly provided food and shelter to the Mujahideen-who were usually neighbors. The Soviets bombed rural villages and granaries, destroyed irrigation systems and crops, destroyed herds and launched sweeps through the countryside-conscripting young men and destroying the village infrastructure. The Soviet leadership believed Mao Tse Tung's dictum that the guerrilla lives in the population like a fish in water. They decided "to kill the fish by draining off the water".⁽¹⁾

Afghanistan became a nation of refugees as more than seven million people left their farms and fled to neighboring Pakistan and Iran or to the cities of Afghanistan. The Mujahideen, who were used to living off the good will of the rural population, now had to transport rations as well as ammunition from Pakistan and Iran into Afghanistan.

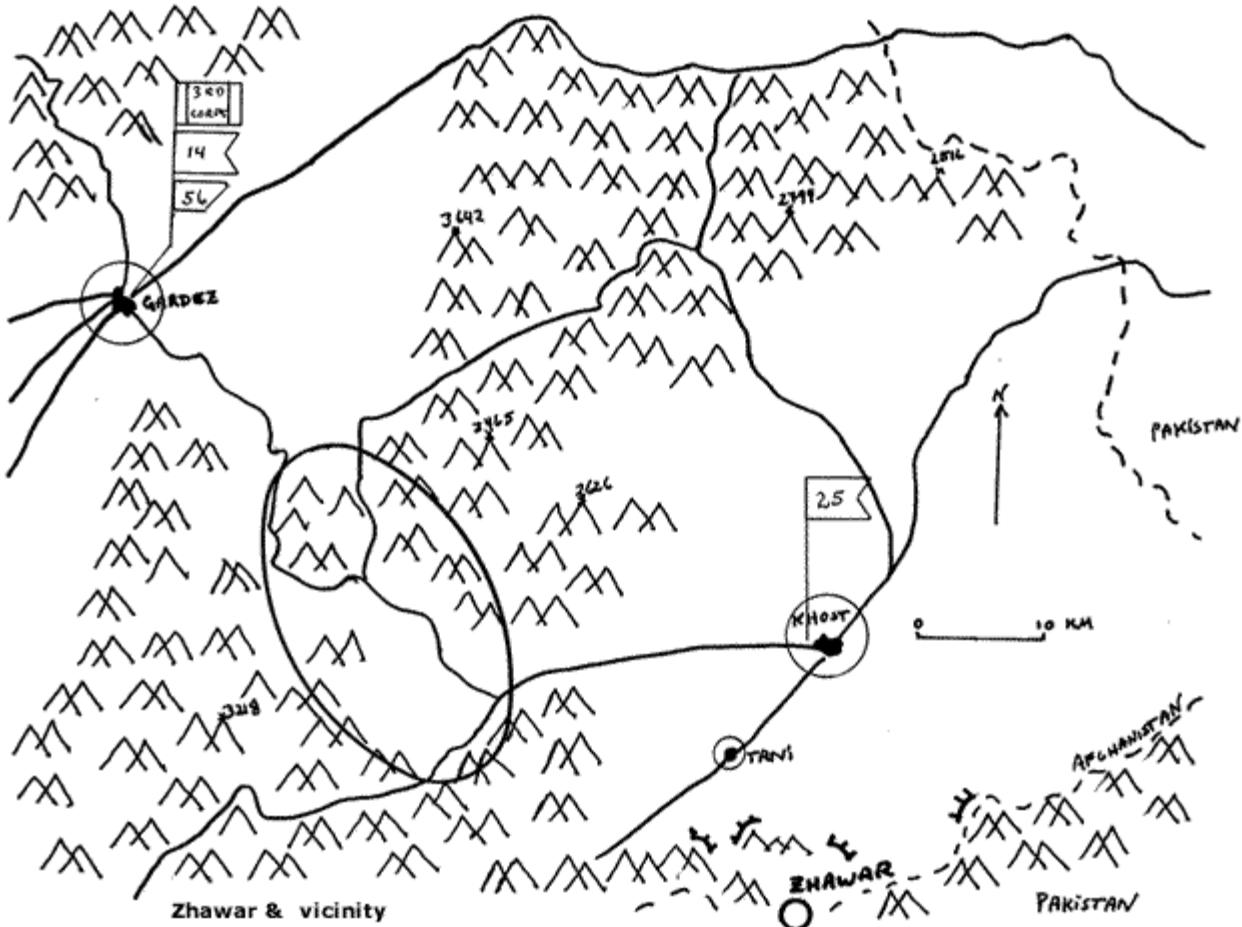
The Mujahideen responded by establishing a series of supply depots, transfer depots and forward supply points logistics bases inside Afghanistan. These logistics facilities made it easier to provision the Mujahideen, but these facilities also had to be defended. The second Soviet phase was to find and destroy the Mujahideen logistics facilities. The odds are stacked against a defending guerrilla force since the attacker has the initiative, armored vehicles, air power and the bulk of artillery and fire power. The Mujahideen tried to offset this with a wise use of terrain and prepared defenses.⁽²⁾

Zhawar was a Mujahideen logistics transfer base in Paktia Province in the eastern part of Afghanistan. It was located four kilometers from the Pakistan border and 15 kilometers from the major Pakistani forward supply base at Miram Shah. Zhawar began as a Mujahideen training center and expanded into a major Mujahideen combat base for supply, training and staging. The base was located inside a canyon surrounded by Sodyaki Ghar and Moghulgi Ghar mountains. The canyon opens to the southeast facing Pakistan.

As the base expanded, Mujahideen used bulldozers and explosives to dig at least 11 major tunnels into the south-east facing ridge of Sodyaki Ghar Mountain. Some of these huge tunnels reached 500 meters and contained a hotel, a mosque, arms depots and repair shops, a garage, a medical point, a radio center and a kitchen. A gasoline generator provided power to the tunnels and the hotel's video player. This impressive base became a mandatory stop for visiting journalists, dignitaries and other "war tourists". Apparently, this construction effort also interfered with construction of fighting positions and field fortifications.

The Mujahideen "Zhawar Regiment", some 500 strong, was permanently based there. This regiment was primarily responsible for logistics support of the mobile groups fighting in the area and for supplying the Islamic Party (HIK) groups in other provinces of Afghanistan. Due to its primary logistic function, the regiment was not fully equipped for combat, but was a credible combat force. The regiment was responsible for local defense and for stopping infiltration of Khad and KGB agents between Afghanistan and Pakistan. They manned checkpoints along the road to screen identification papers. The regiment had a Soviet D30 122mm howitzer, two tanks (captured from the DRA post at Bori in 1983), some six -barrel Chinese-manufactured BM-12 multiple rocket launchers (MRL) and some machine guns and small arms. A Mujahideen air defense company defended Zhawar with five ZPU-1 and four ZPU-2 antiaircraft heavy machine guns. These 14.5mm air defense machine guns were positioned on high ground around the base.⁽³⁾

Defense of the approaches to the base was the responsibility of Mujahideen groups from the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (NIFA), the Islamic Revolutionary Movement (IRMA), and the two Islamic Party factions (HIH and HIK).⁽⁴⁾ There were six major Mujahideen supply routes into Afghanistan.⁽⁵⁾ Twenty percent of all the Mujahideen supplies came through the Zhawar route.⁽⁶⁾ The overall Mujahideen commander of Paktia Province, including Zhawar base, was Jalaluddin Haqani, who was a member of HIK.



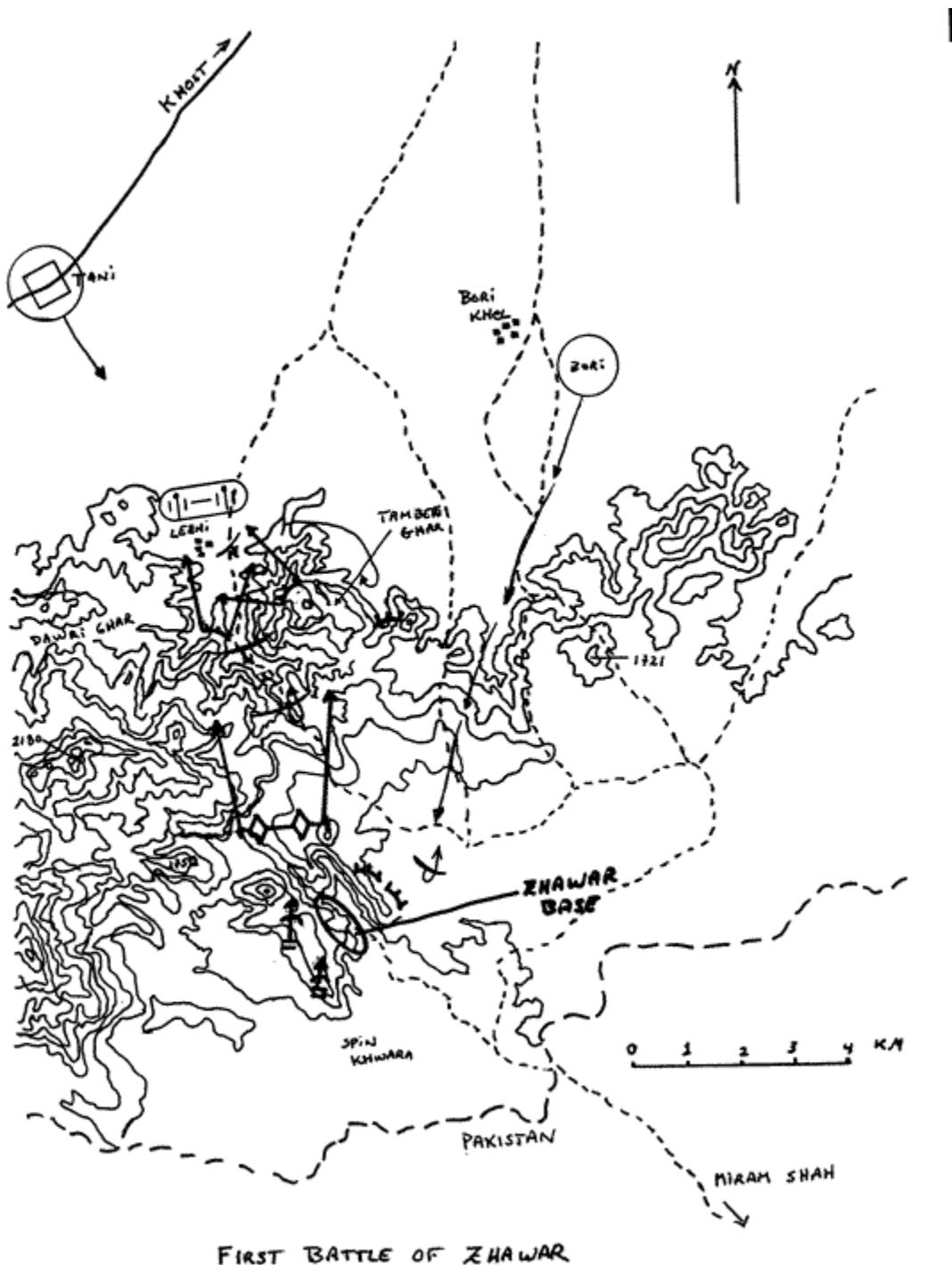
ZHAWAR 1

In September 1985, the DRA 12th Infantry Division from Gardez, with elements of the 37th and 38th Commando Brigades moved from Gardez circuitously through Jaji Maidan to Khost since the direct route through the Sata-Kandow pass had been under Mujahideen control since 1981. This force joined elements of the 25th Infantry Division which was garrisoned in Khost.

Shahnawaz Tani⁽⁷⁾ commanded this mixed force. The DRA military units had their full complement of weapons and equipment, but desertion, security details and other duties kept their units chronically understrength. Since the DRA could not mobilize sufficient force from one regiment or division, they formed composite forces for these missions.⁽⁸⁾

Late one September afternoon, the DRA force began an infantry attack supported by heavy artillery fire and air strikes on Bori, which is northeast of Zhawar (Map First Battle of Zhawar). Zhawar was not prepared for this attack since most of its major commanders, including Haqani, were on a pilgrimage to Mecca (the *Haj*). The DRA recaptured Bori and drove on to Zhawar. The Mujahideen reacted by positioning an 80-man group to block the ridge on the eastern slope of the Moghulgai mountains which form the eastern wall of the Zhawar base. The DRA force arrived at night and during the night fighting lost two APCs and four trucks. Eventually, the

DRA became discouraged, withdrew and returned to Khost.⁽⁹⁾ Mujahideen from the nomad Kochi tribe (led by Malang Kochi and Dadmir Kochi) and Gorbez Mujahideen, recaptured Bori.



The DRA then launched its next attempt from the town of Tani. They recaptured the town of

Lezhi from the Mujahideen and killed Commander Mawlawi Ahmad Gul. The major Mujahideen commanders returned to Pakistan from the Haj on that day (4 September) and hurried north to Zhawar to take command. The Mujahideen from Lezhi retreated south while a 20-man Mujahideen force blocked the Manay Kandow pass. The pass is dominated by a high peak which is capped with a thick rock slab. Under the slab was a natural cave which the Mujahideen improved. The cave could accommodate the 20 Mujahideen during artillery and air strikes. The Mujahideen also dug communications trenches so that they could quickly reoccupy their fighting positions once the firing stopped. The firing positions dominated the Tani plain and were well positioned to stop any infantry attack.

The DRA repeatedly attacked the pass but could make no headway. The infantry would attack, meet withering Mujahideen fire and stop. Then massed air and artillery would pound the area. The infantry would again try to attack, but would again be stopped immediately. The procedure would then repeat itself, but the DRA made no headway during its ten-day attack. After ten days, the DRA called in heavy Soviet airstrikes which continuously hit the mountain top. The thick rock slab began to sway and rock. The Mujahideen were afraid that the rock slab might shift and crush their cave, so they finally withdrew. It was 14 September 1985.

As the Mujahideen fell back, the DRA established observation posts on high ground and started adjusting air and artillery strikes. This gave the tactical advantage to the DRA and their infantry moved through the pass. The Mujahideen rear guard desperately engaged the DRA infantry with machine gun fire and aircraft with ZGU machine guns. The DRA continued to advance and seized the high ground of Tor Kamar. Tor Kamar is within a kilometer of Zhawar base and well within the range of machine gun fire. The DRA thought that the Mujahideen did not have any heavy weapons and became careless and bunched their forces on the high ground. Two Mujahideen, Alam Jan and Muhammad Salim, were former tank commanders in the DRA. In the late afternoon, they moved their two tanks out of the caves and swung north into firing positions. They opened fire and their first rounds destroyed a DRA observation post as an artillery spotting scope and soldiers went flying. The Mujahideen tankers then traversed to the second observation post and destroyed it with their next rounds. Then they opened up on the other DRA soldiers.

The mauled DRA force fell back and maneuvered through the "bird droppings" saddle⁽¹⁰⁾ to the east side of Tambari Ghar. The Mujahideen countered with blocking positions which they held for five days. Haji Amanullah Khan and Ismail Khan played major roles in the fighting at this stage. The DRA Commander, General Tani moved his CP into the Many Kandow pass and tried to reinvigorate the DRA assault, but the Mujahideen held. During the fighting, the Mujahideen shot down a helicopter, but lost a major commander--Mawlawi Fathullah. Mujahideen reinforcements, including Commander Mawlawi Arsalah, arrived from Pakistan and as far away as Jalalabad and Urgun. The DRA were getting chronically low on men and supplies and, after 42 days of fighting, General Tani broke contact and conducted a night withdrawal.

Mujahideen casualties were 106 KIA and 321 WIA. DRA and Soviet losses were heavy, but their numbers are unknown since they evacuated their dead and wounded. Zhawar was a symbol of Mujahideen invincibility in the border area and the Soviets and DRA felt that they had to destroy this myth. The Mujahideen were convinced that Zhawar was impregnable and failed to take some basic security precautions. September-October and April-May are historically the best

months in Afghanistan for campaigning, since the weather is reasonable and the roads are dry. August-September was also the time of the *Haj* and the senior leadership of the area all made this religious pilgrimage together. Consequently, the senior leadership was absent when the battle started and other Mujahideen commanders had to take command of the battle.

Field fortifications around Zhawar were neglected and incomplete. The excellent field fortifications at the mouth of the Manay Kandow pass bought time to improve the other fortifications. The complacent attitude almost cost the Mujahideen their base. Only the unexpected appearance of Mujahideen armor at a crucial minute prevented a DRA victory. The Mujahideen were able to move men and supplies from Miram Shah in Pakistan throughout the battle. The DRA apparently made no attempt to impede access by deploying scatterable mines against the route.

ZHAWAR 2

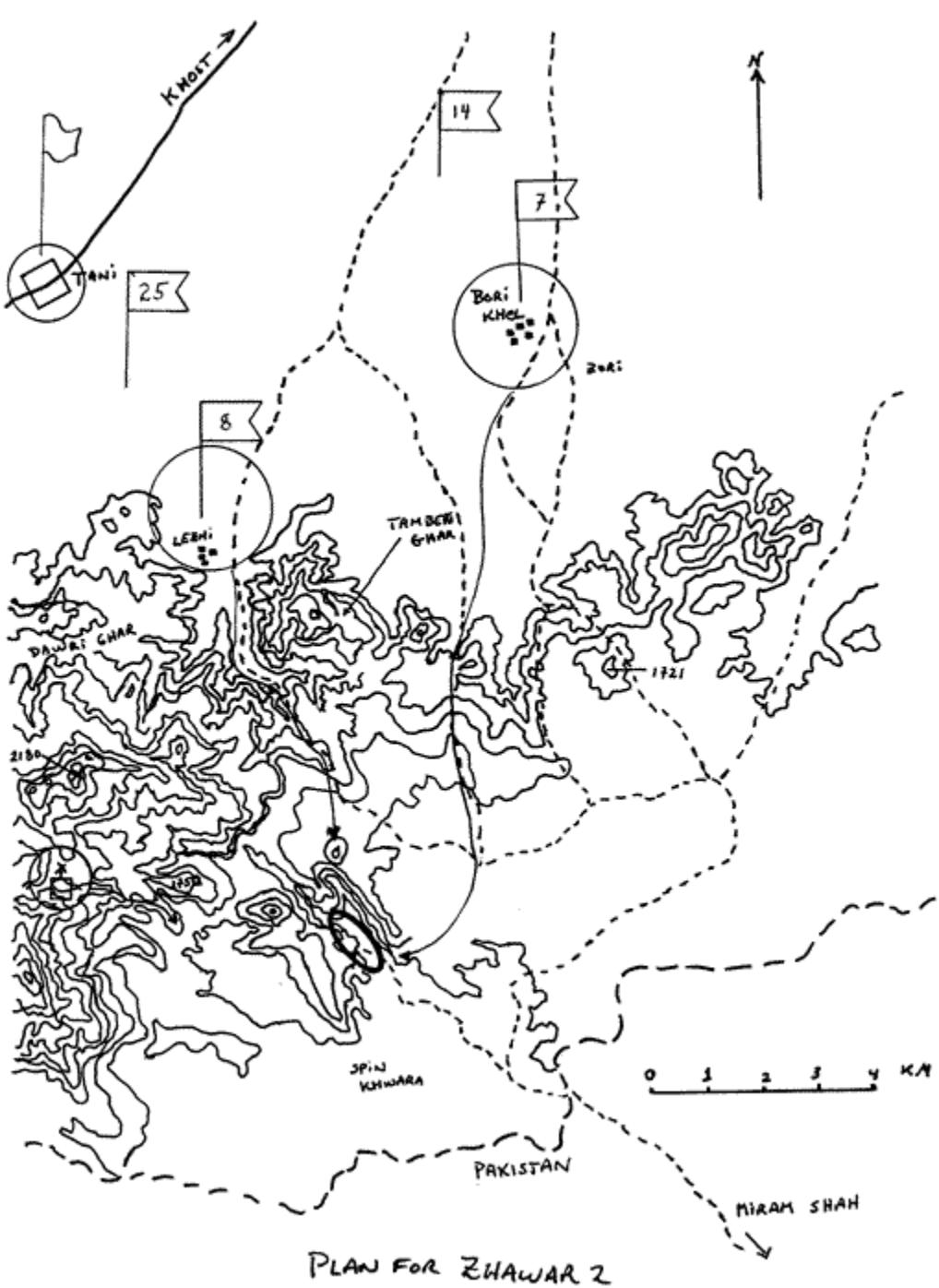
In February 1986, during the XXVII Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, General Secretary Gorbachev informed the delegates that the Soviet Government had worked out a plan with the Afghan Government to conduct a phased withdrawal of Soviet forces. The plan would immediately be put into effect after the political situation stabilized. The Soviet High Command issued orders to their forces to not get involved in direct combat when possible, but to emphasize security missions, guarding lines of communication and important installations. Simultaneously, they adopted additional measures to strengthen the DRA forces. The Soviets felt that the DRA should now take the leading combat role against the Mujahideen and urged the DRA to again attack Zhawar.⁽¹¹⁾

The DRA Ministry of Defense decided to destroy Zhawar. General of the Army Varrenikov⁽¹²⁾ approved the decision and the high command developed the plan for a combined operation.⁽¹³⁾ The plan committed 54 under-strength DRA maneuver battalions plus DRA artillery and aviation to the assault.⁽¹⁴⁾ The 7th Infantry Division (2nd Army Corps) from Kandahar, the 8th Infantry Division (1st Army Corps) from Kabul, the 14th Infantry Division (3rd Army Corps) from Gazni, the 25th Infantry Division (3rd Army Corps) from Khost, the 38th Commando Brigade, and the 666th Air Assault Regiment "Commando" (3rd Army Corps) from Khost were committed to the fight.

The commander of the 3rd Afghan Army Corps, General-Major Mohammad Asef Delavar, was appointed the leader of the Afghan ground forces in this operation.⁽¹⁵⁾ Deputy Minister of Defense General-Lieutenant Nabi Azimi was the overall commander of the Afghan Group of Forces. His adviser was Deputy to the Senior Military Adviser for Combat, General-Major V. G. Trofimenko.⁽¹⁶⁾

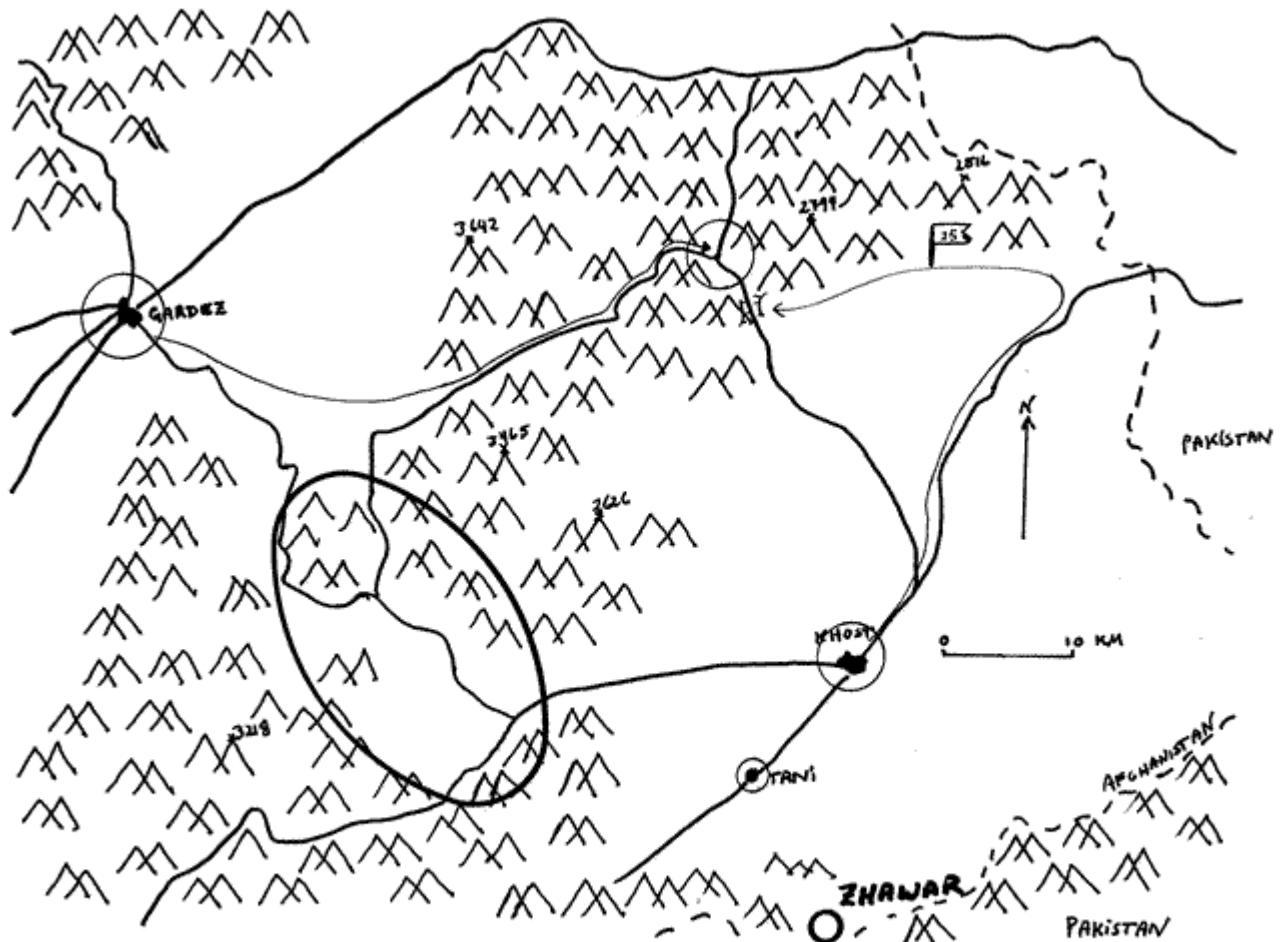
Azimi and Trofimenko planned the offensive. They constituted an eastern combat group comprised of the 7th and 14th Infantry Divisions and the 666th Air Assault Regiment. They also constituted a western combat group consisting of the 8th and 25th Infantry Divisions.⁽¹⁷⁾ The 38th Commando Brigade was committed to make an air assault onto Dawri Gar mountain which rose 3,600 meters above sea level and towered over Zhawar. The commando group had little

experience in air assault missions, and the first lift was scheduled to go in before sunrise as the ground assault began. (See Map Plan for Zhawar 2)



On the 28th of February, government forces, covered by Soviet aviation, began to move out of

Gardez to the combat zone. (See Map Prelude to Zhawar 2). Their movement was aided by two Soviet battalions⁽¹⁸⁾ which occupied the dominant terrain between Kharzun (Mirazi Kalay) and Matwarkh. However, when units of the Afghan force arrived in Matwarkh region, they ceased further movement and stayed there for about a month, simply marking time.



PRELUDE TO ZHAWAR 2

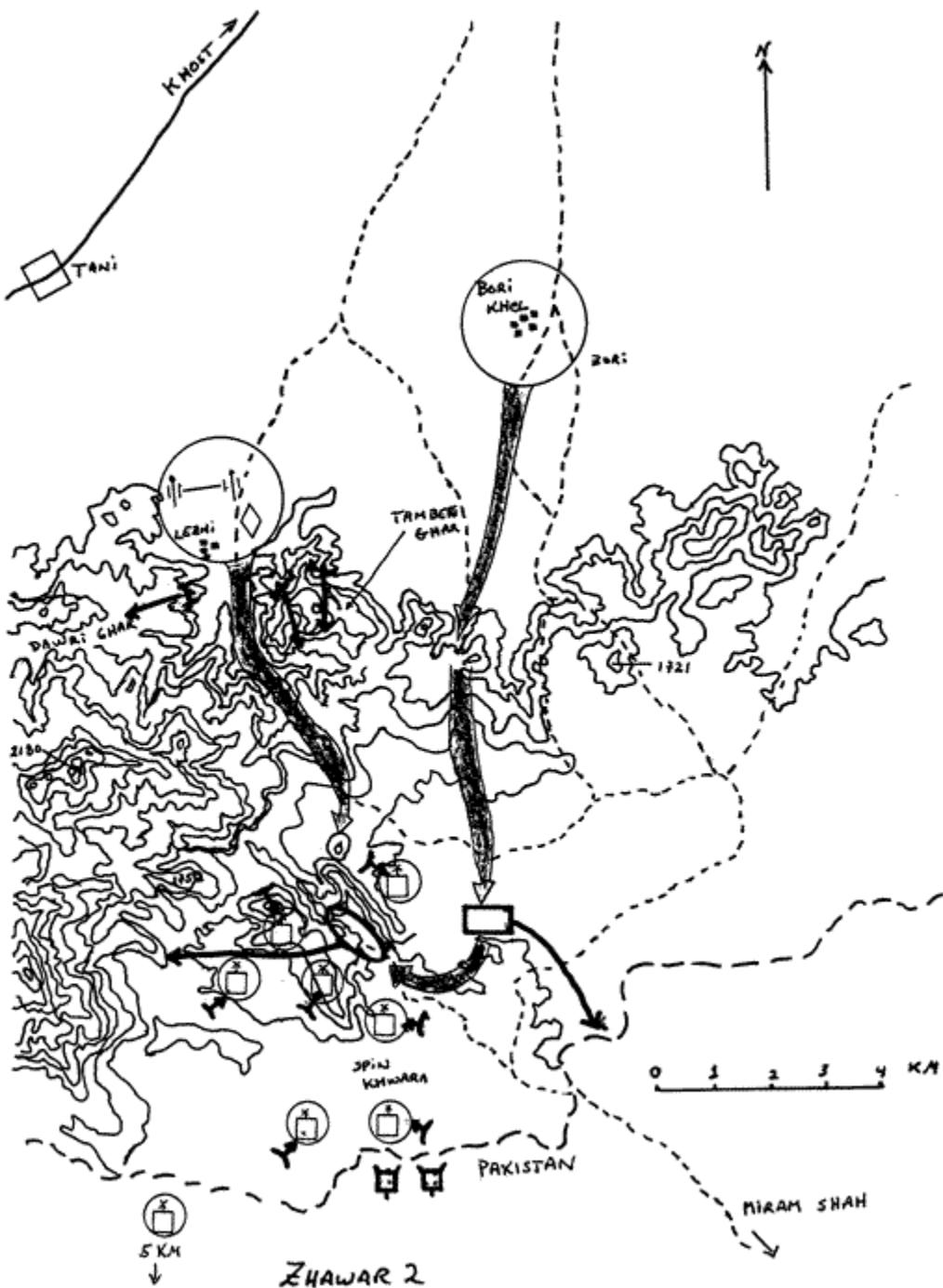
Taking advantage of this passive government force, the Mujahideen began to launch shelling attacks against them. The Afghan forces took casualties, but did not move forward. The operation began to show signs of breaking down.⁽¹⁹⁾ The 25th Infantry Division had moved out of Khost and after engaging the Mujahideen and looting and destroying the villages of Sekan Dara, Kot Kalay, Chine Kalay and Seto Kalay, moved to secure the Naray pass so the composite DRA force could move into the Khost valley. The weather was wet snow mixed with rain and a strong wind. After several days, the composite force moved into the valley and prepared for the offensive.⁽²⁰⁾

The Initial Disaster

The 7th Infantry Division was in the east with the 14th Infantry Division following and the 8th Infantry Division was in the west with the 25th Infantry Division following. Sometime around midnight on 2nd of April, the DRA began a two-hour artillery and aviation preparation of the target area. Then six Mi-8 armed helicopter transport ships flew from Khost airfield to insert the initial assault group of the 38th Commando Brigade. The commandos landed without opposition, but the ground assault ran into immediate, heavy resistance from Mujahideen defending Dawri Gar mountain. The ground advance was forced to halt.

The command post for the operation had moved from Khost to Tani and was in radio contact with the initial air assault group.⁽²¹⁾ Despite all the Mujahideen fire, the air assault group commander reported that the firing was far away from his location. It was now 0300 hours in the early morning. The DRA artillery fired an illumination round on the northern slope of Dawri Gar mountain. "Do you see the round?" they asked the commandos. "Yes, we see it. It's about 15 kilometers from us" they replied. The DRA fired another illumination round five kilometers further away on the southern side of Dawri Gar mountain. "Do you see the round?" the command post again asked the commandos. "Yes, we see it. It's about ten kilometers from us" they replied. The commandos had landed some five kilometers inside Pakistan, beyond the base at Zhawar! The command post informed the commandos of the fact. The insertion group commander quietly answered "I understand. We will withdraw." But after an hour he reported that he was surrounded and locked in combat.⁽²²⁾

The air assault was botched and someone, probably Generals Azimi and Trofimenko, made it much worse. They committed the rest of the brigade to combat-not onto the Dawri Gar mountain landing zone, which was well-populated with Mujahideen, but onto the open areas around Zhawar itself. (See Map Zhawar 2)



Mawlawi Nezamuddin Haqani was in the Zadran area when he saw approximately 20 transport helicopters flying over. He radioed the commanders at Zhawar and warned them. He expected that the helicopters would land at Lezhi or Darakai. After his radio message, he saw another group of helicopters, including some heavy transport helicopters, flying the same direction.

These were escorted by jet fighters. He again radioed this information to Zhawar. Zhawar had 700-800 Mujahideen combatants, plus air defense forces, at the time. However Jalaluddin Haqani, the Zhawar Commander, was at Miram Shah. Mawlawi Haqani also radioed this information separately to Jalaluddin Haqani, who set out immediately for Zhawar.⁽²³⁾

The usual Soviet/DRA pattern for an attack on a Mujahideen base was to pound the area heavily with air strikes and then follow the air strikes with air assault landings, artillery fire and a ground advance to link up with the air assault forces. The air strike gave the Mujahideen commanders warning, reaction time and a solid indicator where the attack would go. In this case, the Mujahideen were caught by surprise. Their intelligence agents within the DRA failed to tip them off and the helicopters landed the rest of the 38th Commando Brigade on seven dispersed landing zones around Zhawar. There were 15 helicopters in the first lift which landed at 0700 hours. More lifts followed to get the entire brigade on the ground. The first two helicopters landed on Spin Khwara plain. Some of the landing zones were within a kilometer of the Pakistani border. Most of the helicopters landed on the high ground to the west of Zhawar. Mujahideen gunners destroyed many helicopters while they were on the ground. Following the air assault, Soviet jet aircraft bombed and strafed Mujahideen positions. Mujahideen air defense was not very effective against these aircraft.

Instead of defending in positions being pounded by fighter-bombers and close-air support aircraft, the Mujahideen went on the offensive and attacked the landing zones. They quickly overran four landing zones and captured many of the DRA commandos. Mujahideen reinforcements moved from Miram Shah in Pakistan to Zhawar and took the commandos from the rear. The commandos were trapped between two forces and were killed or captured. By the end of the day, the Mujahideen captured 530 commandos from the 38th Brigade.⁽²⁴⁾

Meanwhile, Soviet aircraft with smart munitions made ordnance runs on the caves.⁽²⁵⁾ Since the caves faced southeast toward Pakistan, the Soviet aircraft overflew Pakistan in order to turn and fly at the southern face with the smart weapons. Smart missiles hit the first western cave and killed 18 Mujahideen outright. Smart missiles hit the second western cave and collapsed the cave opening trapping some 150 Mujahideen inside. This second cave was 150-meters long and used as the radio transmission bunker. The commander, Jalaluddin Haqani, who had just arrived from Miram Shah, was among those trapped in the second cave.⁽²⁶⁾

Soviet bombers followed the attack of the aircraft with conventional ordnance. They dropped tons of bombs and, in so doing, blasted away the rubble blocking the cave entrances. The trapped Mujahideen escaped. The battle for the remaining landing zones continued. There was one group of commandos on high ground who held out for three days before they were finally overrun.⁽²⁷⁾ The chief of counter-reconnaissance in one of the commando battalions managed to exfiltrate and lead 24 of the commandos to the safety of their own forces. It took eight days. Of the 32 helicopters assigned to the mission, only eight survived.⁽²⁸⁾

The 7th and 14th Infantry Divisions were in the corps first echelon. They tried to link up with the already destroyed air assault-force. In the course of three days, they shot up their entire supply of ammunition and lost control. At the end of the 9th of April, these divisions pulled back to their start points. The 25th Infantry Division, located in the second echelon, covered the western flank,

the artillery positions and the corps rear area.⁽²⁹⁾ The 14th Infantry Division covered the eastern flank. The DRA had regarrisoned Lezhi since Zhawar One and continued to fight for the possession of the Manay Kandow Pass for some ten days following the air landing. The Mujahideen attacked the DRA LOCs and the airfield at Khost while the Mujahideen holding the Manay Kandow checked their advance.⁽³⁰⁾

General Varrenikov sent a message to the Soviet Minister of Defense in which he criticized the leadership of the 7th, 8th and 14th Infantry Divisions and the 3rd Corps Commander. He presented various alibis (weather, length of campaign, poor intelligence) and outlined his plan to reinforce the effort with three DRA regiments, a DRA spetsnaz battalion and six Soviet battalions. He noted General Azimi's replacement as operations commander and requested time to resupply and prepare the force to resume the offensive. General Sokolov, the Minister of Defense, responded with a stern reply and gave Varrenikov twelve days to prepare for resumption of the operation (text of this correspondence is in Annex 1).

Once Again

The Soviet and DRA military leadership were in damage control. A reinforcing regiment each from the DRA 11th and 18th Infantry Divisions and the DRA 21st Mechanized Infantry Brigade arrived along with the DRA 203rd Separate Spetsnaz Battalion (special forces).⁽³¹⁾ The DRA 37th Commando Brigade arrived. Following urgent requests from the leadership of the DRA, Varrenikov authorized five battalions of Soviet forces which were sent to Khost and Tani between 5 and 9 April.⁽³²⁾ Soviet Forward Air controllers were assigned to work with Afghan Forward Air Controllers in the infantry divisions and the reinforcing Soviet unit commanders were assigned to work with the Afghan division commanders.⁽³³⁾

General-Lieutenant Azimi flew off to Kabul on "important business". From Kabul, he issued orders to arrest the helicopter regiment commander, but the commander was hiding. The helicopter pilots who landed the commandos in Pakistan said that the commander of the commandos had ordered them to land where they did.⁽³⁴⁾ General-Lieutenant Gafur from the DRA Operations Section of the General Staff replaced General-Lieutenant Azimi. The Chief of Staff of the 40th Army, General -Major Yu. P. Grekov took command of the five Soviet battalions. General-Lieutenant V. P. Grishin (Operations Group of the Ministry of Defense, USSR in Afghanistan) assumed overall coordination of all the forces. They reworked the operations plan while the force was refitted. The total DRA/Soviet force now exceeded 6,600 men. Then Varrenikov himself arrived at the battlefield. DRA President Karmal had requested that General of the Army V. I. Varrenikov take over as overall commander of the operation.⁽³⁵⁾

While this refitting, restructuring and replanning was going on, the communists kept the pressure on the Mujahideen with air strikes and artillery. In first battle for Zhawar, DRA/Soviet artillery and air strikes stopped at night, but this time they were conducted around the clock. At night, they dropped aerial flares for illumination. This heavy fire support continued for 12 days.⁽³⁶⁾ The tempo of the air and artillery increased on the morning of 17 April.

"Soviet pilots showed a miraculous mastery and heroism. Many of us saw how the aircraft of LTC A. Rutskoy, the commander of the aviation regiment, was shot

down....His aircraft seemed to draw all the air defense fire. He made four or five runs on the base and then we saw his plane dart and he then flashed from the mountain ridge into the valley. We felt, from the convulsive jerks, that the pilot was attempting to start his engine, but alas. The bang of the ejection seat rang out. The aircraft flew straight and level for a few seconds and then the nose dipped and the aircraft slammed into the ground and exploded somewhere in the vicinity of Barankhel. A BTR from the operations group of the 40th Army went and picked up the pilot."⁽³⁷⁾

Pakistan was clearly concerned with the major battle raging on her border. The Mujahideen lacked effective air defense against helicopter gunships, and the strafing and bombing attacks of high-performance aircraft. The Mujahideen had some British Blowpipe shoulder-fired air defense missiles, but they were not effective. Pakistan sent some officers into Zhawar during the fighting to take out attacking aircraft with the British Blowpipe shoulder-fired missiles and show the Mujahideen how it was done. After climbing a mountain and firing thirteen Blowpipe missiles to no avail, a Pakistani captain and his NCO were severely wounded by the attacking aircraft.⁽³⁸⁾

The renewed ground attack began on the morning of 17 April. The 25th Infantry division led the assault in the west and the 14th Infantry Division led the assault in the east. In order to deceive the Mujahideen and divert their forces, the eastern group began its attack at 0630 and the western group began at 1030.⁽³⁹⁾ The DRA 25th Infantry Division was concentrated at Lezhi. The Mujahideen had fortified the Dawri Gar mountain and could cover the majority of the slopes with accurate fire. Multiple attacks on the mountain failed. When the artillery fire preparation would start, the Mujahideen would shelter in caves and when the preparation ceased, they reoccupied their firing positions and repulsed the attack. General-Major Asef, the DRA 25th Infantry Division Commander and LTC Mikhail Karaev, his adviser, observed this. During the night, they silently moved one of their regiments toward the summit and, at dawn, launched an attack on the Mujahideen without any artillery preparation. The Mujahideen did not expect this and faltered. The regiment captured the summit in a matter of minutes.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The Mujahideen fell back from the Lezhi area into the higher mountains and slowly the DRA/Soviet force moved through the Manay Kandow pass.

At the same time, the DRA/Soviet force launched a flanking column from the Lezhi area that moved to the east. This column moved toward Moghulgai mountain on the east flank of Zhawar. There, a regiment of HIH Mujahideen waited in defense. However, as the DRA column neared, the HIH regiment withdrew without a fight. At the same time, Jalaluddin Haqani was wounded by attacking aircraft. He had head and facial wounds, but rumors spread among the Mujahideen that Haqani was dead. The Mujahideen evacuated Zhawar and moved high into surrounding mountains as the two ground columns closed onto Zhawar.⁽⁴¹⁾

The Mujahideen were unable to evacuate most of the stores from Zhawar. They pulled out the two T-55 tanks and fought the advancing column for awhile before abandoning the tanks in the foothills. LTC Kulenin, the adviser to the commander of the DRA 21st Mechanized Brigade and

his political deputy were killed by a T-55 round.⁽⁴²⁾ The Soviet and DRA forces entered Zhawar. It was noon on 19 April 1986.

A Short Stay

After a narrow passage of mountain road, it opened up into a wide canyon of 150 meters, whose sides stretched upwards for two kilometers. Caves were carved into the rock face of the side facing Pakistan. The caves were up to 10 meters long, four meters wide and three meters tall. The walls were faced with brick. The cave entrances were covered with powerful iron doors which were painted in bright colors. There were 41 caves in all. All had electricity. Behind a fence was a mosque with a beautiful brick entrance and a hospital with new medical equipment manufactured in the United States. They even had an ultra-sound machine which we moved to the Khost hospital. There was nickel-plated furniture including adjustable beds. There was a library with English-language and Farsi-language books. There was a bakery and by the entrance was a stack of fresh *nan*.⁽⁴³⁾ In the storage area, there were metal shelving units where boxes of arms and ammunition were neatly stacked. Further on, there was a storage cave for mines. There was every kind of mine imaginable: antitank, antivehicular, and antipersonnel mines from Italy, France, the Netherlands, and Germany. Hand grenade and artillery simulators were stored separately. The demolition explosives of various types and detonators were stored in a separate cave. In the very furthest part of the base were repair and maintenance bays complete with grease pits. There was a T-34 tank in one of them. The tank was serviced, fueled and had new batteries. It started right up and drove out of the service bay. Above the storage caves was a beautiful building marked "Hotel". There was overstuffed furniture inside and the floors were covered with carpets. How many of our aircraft had worked this site over and the hotel and caves were still intact.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The Afghan soldiers began to loot the base. Even the two-meter high brick facing wall was pulled down and hauled back to the 25th Infantry Division at Khost. The DRA had no intention of staying in Zhawar long enough for the Mujahideen to organize a counterattack. The Mujahideen were moving MRL up to the Pakistan border to fire on the communist forces.

Colonel Kutsenko was in charge of destroying Zhawar and had four hours to do so. He split up the detonation of the caves and buildings between the sappers of the 45th Engineer Regiment of the 40th Army and Afghan sappers. He knew that he could not destroy the caves in the available time. Above the caves was a 30-meter thick layer of rock. If they could drill a one-to-two meter shaft into the cave ceiling, they could have crammed that full of explosives and caused a collapse, but there was not time to do that before the troops had to leave. So the sappers stacked about 200 antitank mines in the primary caves and rigged them for simultaneous electric detonation. Even if they had laid in ten times more explosives, it would not have made any difference since the force of the explosion would follow the path of least resistance and the caves would channel the force out the caves' mouths.⁽⁴⁵⁾

And the moment finally arrived. The caves ... shot out their contents. After the dust settled, all of the canyon was filled with clumps of earth, shattered bricks and stones. The caves were swept clean, but were somewhat larger and their entries were partially clogged by rock slides from above. The gates were torn pieces of iron laying at the foot of the opposite canyon wall. [\(46\)](#)

The combat soldiers were withdrawing as the sappers remained behind to mine the base. The work was hard and complicated by the lack of time. The sappers had to depart before nightfall. At 1700 hours, the command was given for the remaining force to leave and head for Tani. The Mujahideen were quick to fall on the heels of a retiring foe. Anyone who would fall behind or stop would be in serious trouble. Rockets fired from across the Pakistan border were landing near the sappers and these rounds were becoming more precise. It was time for the sappers to join the exodus. Kutsenko gave the command to depart on his radio. The Afghan sappers immediately quit working and boarded their armored vehicles. The Soviet commander of the sappers from the 45th Engineer Regiment answered "Right away". His "Right away" lasted 15 minutes. Kutsenko again called him and ordered that they cease work and depart. Their commander again answered "Right away". Kutsenko then told him "You may stay here for an hour, but your soldiers need to quickly join the convoy. The Mujahideen are here and we are leaving." This time, the Soviet sappers quit work and immediately boarded their vehicles. Kutsenko insured that everyone was on board and the trail party left. Kutsenko sat in the captured tank and returned to Tani on it. [\(47\)](#)

After 57 days of campaigning, the DRA held Zhawar for only five hours. In addition to the standard mines and booby traps, the communist forces planted seismic-detonated mines and sprinkled aerial-delivered butterfly bombs over the area. The Mujahideen returned to Zhawar on the following day. The first Mujahideen to enter the area were killed by seismic mines. The Mujahideen withdrew and fired mortars, BM12 and machine guns into the area to set off the seismic mines. Then they began the slow process of finding the rest of the mines manually. The Mujahideen pushed forward from Zhawar to retake Lezhi and other areas. Since the DRA was only in Zhawar for five hours, the DRA did not manage to destroy the caves, but collapsed some entrances. Weapons that were stored in some of the caves were still intact and useable. [\(48\)](#)

Mujahideen casualties were 281 KIA and 363 WIA. DRA and Soviet losses are unknown, but the Mujahideen reportedly destroyed 24 helicopters, shot down two jets and captured 530 personnel of the 38th Commando Brigade. The Mujahideen held a field tribunal. Yunis Khalis and other Mujahideen commanders were the judges. They tried and executed Colonel Qalandar Shah, the commander of the 38th Commando Brigade and another colonel who landed with the brigade to adjust artillery fire. There were 78 other officers among the prisoners. They were given a chance to confess to their crimes from different battles and then all the officers were executed. All the soldiers were given amnesty since they were conscripts who were forced to fight. The amnestied soldiers were asked to perform two years of labor service in exchange for the amnesty. They did their service in logistics, were "reeducated" and released after two years.

Aftermath

The withdrawal of the HIH regiment, coupled with the rumors of Haqani's death, greatly aided the DRA victory. Haqani's loss, besides affecting Mujahideen morale, cost the Mujahideen what little command and control they had left at this juncture of the battle. The DRA failed to throw a blocking force on the Miram Shah road, although they knew that Mujahideen reinforcements were moving along this route. As a minimum, they could have employed scatterable mines on the road, but they left the route open.

Clearly there were intelligence failures on both sides. The DRA and Soviets had ample opportunity to collect on Zhawar, but failed to determine the basic outline of the Mujahideen defenses and their manning. The DRA and Soviets never detected the presence of the Mujahideen regiment that slipped away at the crucial juncture and allowed their victory. The Mujahideen, on the other hand, should have been aware that Zhawar was at risk since the DRA had been moving forces toward the Khost valley for some forty days. Yet, the leadership of Zhawar was out of country during the lengthy build-up. The usual Mujahideen sources failed to tip them off as to the start time of the assault or the air assault. And, although the pathfinder commando element that landed in Pakistan was overrun by Mujahideen, these Mujahideen did not get the word to Zhawar. The Zhawar defenders were surprised by the air assault of the commando main body.

The DRA and Soviet reluctance to hold Zhawar for any length of time in order to do a thorough job of destroying the base is a strong testament to the ability of the Mujahideen to threaten their lines of communication. The commanders had no desire to risk being trapped in Zhawar and having to mount yet another operation to fight their way in and out of Zhawar. Their reserves were committed and the danger was real.

The DRA celebrated the fall of Zhawar with parades and medals as a major victory. But Zhawar was back in full operation within weeks of the attack. Having been trapped in the caves, the Mujahideen learned to make connecting tunnels between caves. They reopened the caves and built connecting tunnels. The caves were improved and lengthened to 400-500 meters long.⁽⁴⁹⁾ In retrospect, the battles of Zhawar seem to have been exercises in futility, but at the time, they were considered tests of whether the DRA could stand up to the Mujahideen after the Soviet withdrawal.

Annex 1: Correspondence between General Varrenikov and General Sokolov

SECRET(URGENT)

USSR Ministry of Defense
To Marshal of the Soviet Union
Comrade S. L. Sokolov

I report.

Preliminary results from the combat conducted by the Afghan Army in the region of Khost may be evaluated as unsatisfactory, although the Mujahideen suffered significant personnel and weapons losses.

Reasons

1. The forces and aviation assigned to the operation were poorly trained and the personnel had poor morale and fighting spirit. The combat potential of the divisions was weak and their potential was very limited. Further, the commanders of the 7th, 8th and 14th Infantry Divisions and, especially, the commander of the 3rd Corps were completely unprepared to lead their forces.
2. At the start of the operation, there was an incomplete intelligence picture and a wrong estimate of enemy strength. Enemy strength was much greater than determined. The close proximity of Pakistan allowed the enemy complete maneuverability and the unimpeded capability to replace personnel and weapons losses. Further, the Mujahideen were able to use strong fire support from the territory of Pakistan. This was particularly true against our forces moving along the border.

Young, well-trained, steadfast Pakistanis participated directly in the battle in the base region of Zhawar and Miram Shah (south of Khost).

3. This was an unfortunate time of year to conduct combat. A more advantageous time would have been in January to the start of February or in April. The end of February and March are characterized by an abundance of rain mixed with snow (particularly this year). This forced the troops to move through the thawed mud along the existing road under enemy fire.
4. The difficult weather, length of the combat (30 days) and the "uncomfortable" column formation forced on the troops in their advance to the international border exhausted the troops and led to low morale. The short preparation time for combat in Khost from 31 March to 4 April did not revitalize the forces.
5. During the course of combat, the leadership tolerated nonobjective estimates of the situation, false situation reports and false combat reports. As a result, they were unable to provide the necessary picture of the situation.
6. There were mistakes in the conduct of the assault landing. The planning was conducted correctly. However, the practical application was organized unsatisfactorily. Because of this, the assault force was scattered over LZs located four to 20 kilometers from their planned LZs and this allowed the Mujahideen to defeat the air assault in the course of a day. The preparation of the helicopter crew navigators was unsatisfactory and they were poorly oriented on the terrain during the landing. They only had bearings and times of flight. These were the main reasons for the errors.

Measures that were taken

1. Additional massive air and artillery strikes were planned and conducted on strong points and pin-pointed enemy firing points. The "Shleyf" round was employed (on the approaches to the base, strong points equipped with cement structures, and armored cupolas of dug-in tanks).
2. Reinforcing units were moved into the combat zone. These included the 50th Infantry Regiment from the 18th Infantry Division, the 81st Infantry Regiment from the 11th Infantry Division, an infantry regiment from the 21st Mechanized Infantry Brigade and a battalion of spetsnaz.

Soviet forces were moved to support the Afghan forces. These included two battalions from a separate air assault brigade and two battalions from a separate parachute regiment.

3. All types of intelligence collection were reinforced, particularly that directed against the Zhadran tribe.
4. The leadership of the Afghan forces was reinforced. With this goal, General-Lieutenant Azimi (who was ill) was replaced by General-Lieutenant Gafur to direct the battle....

The Army Chief of Staff directed the 40th Army units. Overall coordination of all the forces was provided by General-Lieutenant V. P. Grishin (Operations Group of the Ministry of Defense, USSR in Afghanistan).

Preventive Measures (lessons learned)

1. It is necessary to take radical measures to replenish the personnel in the Afghan Army (particularly in the 1st and 3rd Army Corps). Right now, the line strength of the combat divisions is 200-300 men....
5. Refrain from conducting large-scale independent actions by the Afghan forces, particularly those that last a long time or are conducted far from their garrisons. Combat must not exceed 10-12 days.
6. The forces must not conduct actions against Mujahideen bases located close to the border or in a region where it is impossible to isolate the enemy from the arrival of his reserves. These regions should be subjected to massive aviation strikes, dropping powerful bombs, scatterable mines, etc.

Further actions

....Consider that the result of the conduct of military actions will convey a significant military-political ideal, it is expedient to increase the aviation strikes to the maximum, to destroy enemy points and simultaneously take measures to train the Afghan forces for decisive battle....

Varrenikov

April 1986⁽⁵⁰⁾

The Minister of Defense of the USSR replied with the following order to the Operations Group of the USSR Ministry of Defense in Afghanistan:

Secret

First Deputy Chief of the General Staff
General of the Army
Comrade V. I. Varrenikov
Chief Military Adviser in the DRA
General-Colonel
Comrade V. A. Vostrov

The Chief Military Adviser in the DRA and his operatives were mistaken in their estimate of the size of the enemy groupings and their potential in Paktia Province. During the preparation for combat, they did not consider the changes which had occurred since 1985 in that region. The Mujahideen have received new weapons and equipment and learned from the experience of the 1985 strike in that region. The timing of the operation was a mistake. In the course of the operation, neither the new Chief Military Adviser to the DRA, General-Colonel V. A. Vostrov, nor the Operational Group of the USSR Ministry of Defense took the necessary measures in order to correct the errors in a timely manner.

I demand:

1. The conduct of a comprehensive estimate of the correlation of forces assembled in the region of Khost. Improve intelligence activities against the enemy. Conduct air strikes based on targets identified by intelligence and cease area bombing.
2. Organize troop control. Subordinate the reinforcing units brought from the center of the country to the appropriate division commanders before accepting combat again.

3. If necessary, delay your offensive actions for several days. Ready the units and subunits of the Afghan forces for the upcoming combat. Replenish their ammunition and material stocks and clarify their combat missions. Organize coordination with aviation.

4. Your plan for the conduct of future combat will be present for confirmation by 17 April.

Sokolov

312/1/07 sh

April 1986⁽⁵¹⁾

Endnotes

1. Claude Malhauret, Afghan Alternative Seminar, Monterey, California, November 1993.
2. Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester W. Grau, The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War, to be published in 1998, xvii and Chapter 11, page 1.
3. Interviews with participants Lieutenant Omar and Mawlawi Nezamuddin Haqani in Jalali and Grau, chapter 11.
4. Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, The Bear Trap: Afghanistan's Untold Story, London: Leo Cooper, 168.
5. Ibid, 111.
6. Ibid. 159.
7. General Shahnawaz Tani was from the neighboring town of Tani and enjoyed some popular support in the area. He later became DRA Defense Minister.
8. Omar and Haqani.
9. Perhaps this was a reconnaissance in force.
10. Local name for the chalk layers in the rock which mark this saddle.
11. Aleksandr Lyakhovskiy, Tragediya i doblest' Afgana [The Tragedy and Valor of the Afghan Veterans], Moscow: Iskona, 1995, 300-301.
12. General of the Army Valentin Leonidovich Varrenikov was head of the operations group of the Soviet Ministry of Defense in Afghanistan from 1985-1989.
13. Viktor Kutsenko, "Dzhavara" [Zhawar], Soldat udachi [Soldier of fortune], July 1996, 24. Soldat udachi is affiliated with the American Soldier of Fortune magazine and does translate and print some articles on weapons and warfare from its parent magazine, but is an editorially-independent magazine that has enjoyed popularity in Russia and serves as a publishing outlet for veterans from Afghanistan, Chechnya, Ethiopia, Angola, and Mozambique. Some 60% of its articles are written by Russians.
14. Lyakhovskiy, 301.

15. Ibid.
16. S. Korennoy in Lyakhovskiy, 307-308.
17. Kutsenko, 24.
18. The 1st and 3rd battalions of the 191 Separate Motorized Rifle Regiment stationed in Gazni.
19. Lyakhovskiy, 301.
20. S. Korennoy in Lyakhovski, 306-309.
21. The maximum size this force could have been was sixty men , since the Mi-8 could lift ten fully-equipped men at this altitude.
22. Kutsenko, 24-25.
23. Interviews with Lieutenant Omar, Mawlawi Nezamuddin Haqani and Mawlawi Abdul-Rahman in Jalali and Grau, Chapter 11.
24. Following Zhawar Two, the 38th Commando Brigade became the base of the newly-formed 2nd Division. Casualty figures vary. The Soviet figures are 312 landed of which 25 survived. Korennoy in Lyakhovksi, 309.
25. Most probably, these were KAB-1500L-PR laser-guided bombs launched from the SU-25 ground attack aircraft. The KAB-1500L-PR carries a 1100 kilogram (2425 pound) warhead and can penetrate two meters of reinforced concrete buried in 20 meters of soil. It has a one-two meter CEP (circular error probable). Yuri Zuenko and Sergey Korostelev, Boevye samolety Rossii [Russian Combat Aircraft], Moscow: ELAKOS, 1994, 170-171.
26. Interviews with Lieutenant Omar, Mawlawi Nezamuddin Haqani and Mawlawi Abdul-Rahman in Jalali and Grau, Chapter 11.
27. Ibid.
28. Korennoy in Lyakhovksi, 309.
29. Ibid
30. Interviews with Lieutenant Omar, Mawlawi Nezamuddin Haqani and Mawlawi Abdul-Rahman in Jalali and Grau, Chapter 11.
31. Ibid. Spetsnaz is a Russian term for Special Forces used in long-range reconnaissance and rugged fighting.
32. The 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 345th Separate Parachute Regiment stationed at Bagram, the 4th Battalion of the 56th Air Assault Brigade and another battalion of this brigade stationed at Gardez and 2nd Battalion of the 191st Separate Motorized Rifle Regiment stationed in Ghazni. The airborne and air assault battalions flew in Khost airfield while the Motorized Rifle Battalion drove into Tani.
33. Lyakhovski, 301.
34. Kutsenko, 25.
35. Lyakhovski, 304.

36. Interviews with Lieutenant Omar, Mawlawi Nezamuddin Haqani and Mawlawi Abdul-Rahman in Jalali and Grau, Chapter 11.

37. Korennoy in Lyakhovski, 310. At the end of 1988, Colonel Aleksandr Rutskoy, who was by then the deputy to the 40th Army Commander for aviation, was flying in this same region and was again shot down-this time with an air-to-air missile. He landed in Pakistan and was captured. He was ransomed by the Soviet government. He was decorated with the title of "Hero of the Soviet Union". Later, Rutskoy entered politics and became the Vice President of the Russian Federation. However, in October 1993, he lead the opposition to Russian Federation President Yeltsin. He was arrested. In February 1994, he was freed from imprisonment by decree of the Duma of the Russian Federation.

38. Yousaf and Adkin, 171 and interviews conducted by Ali Jalali with Mujahideen in the fall of 1996. Mr. Jalali's sources chose to remain anonymous since they were sworn to secrecy at the time.

39. Lyakhovski, 305.

40. Kutsenko, 25.

41. Interviews with Lieutenant Omar, Mawlawi Nezamuddin Haqani and Mawlawi Abdul-Rahman in Jalali and Grau, Chapter 11.

42. Korennoy in Lyakhovski, 311.

43. Nan is an unleavened oval-shaped flatbread, ranging in size from a small to a regular pizza.

44. Kutsenko, 25-26.

45. Ibid, 26.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Interviews with Lieutenant Omar, Mawlawi Nezamuddin Haqani and Mawlawi Abdul-Rahman in Jalali and Grau, Chapter 11.

49. Veterans of Zhawar have proposed to Haqani that the caves be restored and kept as a museum so that 200 years from now, people can visit them and reflect on their heritage. From 7-9 May 1990, 47 major Mujahideen field commanders from all over Afghanistan met at Zhawar in the first united of all major commanders of all factions. The purpose was to chart post-Soviet military strategy. Zhawar was chosen for the conference for its symbolic importance. Afghan Information Center Monthly Bulletin, Peshawar, May 1990.

50. Lyakhovski, 302-303.

51. Ibid, 304.